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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Summary

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly pursuant to its resolution 71/177 on the rights of the child, in which it requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to the General Assembly on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate and on the progress achieved and the challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The report covers the period from August 2016 to July 2017 and describes current trends. In addition, the report provides information on the vision of the new Special Representative, including on her engagement with regional organizations and international partners, as well as on dialogue with parties to conflict, which includes an analysis of the "Children, not soldiers" campaign. It outlines a number of challenges and priorities on her agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 71/177, the General Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to it and the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits and on the progress achieved and the challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The request stemmed from the mandate given by the Assembly in its resolution 51/77, in which it recommended, inter alia, that the Special Representative raise awareness and promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by armed conflict and foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children's rights in these situations. In line with that mandate, and as requested by the Assembly in its resolution 71/177, the present report provides information on the progress of the "Children, not soldiers" campaign. It also highlights progress made in the past year and outlines the immediate priorities, as well as a longer-term vision, to advance the children and armed conflict agenda in collaboration with States Members of the United Nations, United Nations entities, regional and subregional organizations and civil society.

II. Taking stock of the children and armed conflict agenda

A. A vision going forward following 20 years of the children and armed conflict mandate

2. Since the inception of the mandate, the Special Representative and her Office have played a central role in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including through raising awareness and ensuring that the issue is prioritized on the international agenda. The appointment of the new Special Representative, Virginia Gamba, in early May 2017, therefore presents a timely opportunity to look forward and analyse how efforts can be elevated to end and prevent grave violations against children in conflict. To that end, the recently appointed Special Representative is aiming to enhance her mandated activities on both raising public awareness to mobilize global action and garnering lessons learned and developing best practices to aid practitioners and Member States.

3. In the two decades since the establishment of the mandate, the United Nations has developed innovative methods to engage with both Governments and armed groups for the benefit of children most affected by war. As a result, 28 action plans have been signed with parties to conflict to end violations against children and establish mechanisms to prevent them. Where the context was conducive and political will was strong, steady progress was attained, which led to the full implementation of action plans and the subsequent delisting of nine parties to conflict from the annexes to the annual report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict.

4. The public awareness campaign, entitled "Children, not soldiers", launched jointly with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2014, catalysed further progress to protect children affected by armed conflict. The campaign, which focused on one of the six grave violations, namely ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children, led to tangible results. With greater awareness of the issue, the Special Representative, together with UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs, was able to speed up progress, and child protection advisers in situations of armed conflict played a critical role in operationalizing action plans and further strengthening the overall

child protection architecture. Concrete advances included the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children, the issuance of military command orders, the systematic screening of troops, the adoption of age-assessment guidelines, the development of handover protocols and the release and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces.

5. A range of other initiatives by the Special Representative and her Office have also had an impact, such as supporting the development of national legislation to protect children; accountability initiatives; advocating for the ratification of international instruments; and leveraging peace processes to engage with parties to conflict on children affected by violations, notably in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Nevertheless, the complexity of the current international peace, security and development contexts contributed to an increase in the number of children at risk in situations of armed conflict. The mandate is therefore at a critical juncture, and both the international community and civil society need to reflect on how to renew their commitment to build on past achievements and work towards the goal of providing the best possible protection of children affected by war.

6. To this end, as mandated by the General Assembly, the Special Representative plans to establish capacity to enhance synergies among different United Nations agencies, regional and subregional organizations, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society to raise further awareness of the six grave violations against children. The Special Representative considers it vital to commence lessons-learned exercises to identify best practices through research, analysis, assessment and working partnerships that can shed further light on the past 20 years of the Organization's collective work on children and armed conflict and identify difficulties encountered in strengthening the protection of children and ongoing trends and dynamics to inform future action.

7. It is essential to engage additional actors in pursuit of greater protection of children, or enhance engagement with actors where partnerships are already in place. For example, partnerships with regional and subregional organizations can be developed or further enriched to advance politically or legally binding instruments to strengthen the prevention of violations in situations of armed conflict and facilitate programmatic responses when violations do occur. Among the regional organizations with which the Special Representative envisions enhancing engagement are the African Union, the League of Arab States and the European Union. Similarly, the Special Representative hopes to continue and strengthen the existing collaboration with such organizations as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the pursuit of best practices and with the aim of supporting the development of operational procedures that adequately take into account child protection concerns.

8. Engagement will also be pursued with subregional organizations, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States and the Andean Community. Such engagement has historical roots in the work of the Office of the Special Representative; focusing on subregional organizations has the potential to be a multiplier for further progress. For instance, in the early 2000s, ECOWAS progressively integrated child protection into its policies and institutions, including through the adoption of the Accra Declaration and Plan of Action on War-Affected Children, at the Conference on War-Affected Children in West Africa, held in Ghana from 27 to 28 April 2000; the establishment of a child protection unit in its secretariat; and the endorsement of an agenda for action for war-affected children in West Africa at the ECOWAS summit in 2003. The Special Representative plans to contribute to enhancing progress by supporting the re-establishment of such

instruments and mechanisms and creating new partnerships to leverage the tools of a broad range of subregional organizations.

9. The additional focus on advocacy and lessons learned will feed into the overarching goal of the mandate, namely strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict. It is envisioned that lessons learned and raising public awareness will aid interactions with parties to conflict when violations against children occur. Best practices can be used to assist parties to conflict who demonstrate a willingness to better protect children by ensuring that the conduct of hostilities complies with international standards. When a party to conflict is open to entering into dialogue, the plethora of best practices that have been developed over the past 20 years can guide technical discussions. However, to draw on the full potential of these best practices, it will be important to compile, capture and make them available to Governments, protection actors and other relevant entities. Awareness-raising, on the other hand, can be used to put pressure on belligerents who do not demonstrate the same willingness to improve their conduct. By using the different avenues of public awareness, political advocacy and direct engagement, parties may display greater receptiveness to improve their conduct and reduce violations against children. These prevention efforts are at the heart of the Special Representative's goals.

B. Emerging issues and challenges

Attacks on schools and protected personnel

10. The General Assembly has played an important role in recognizing the right of the child to education by requesting Member States to put in place appropriate frameworks for education in emergencies (resolution 64/290), and by enshrining relevant provisions in a number of key international human rights treaties, including in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (General Assembly resolution 2200 A (XXI)) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly resolution 44/25, annex). Notwithstanding broad ratification of these instruments, attacks on schools, educational personnel and students have become commonplace in conflicts across the globe, preventing children from realizing their rights. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, children in conflict-affected countries are more than twice as likely to be out of school compared with those living in countries at peace.[1] With more than 245 million children estimated to be living in conflict zones, the issue of children missing out on education owing to the effects of conflict deserves urgent attention. In 2016, the United Nations verified more than 750 attacks on schools and hospitals, taking place in 18 of 20 country situations on the children and armed conflict agenda. The number and intensity of such violations were of particular concern in Afghanistan, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

11. Indiscriminate attacks, including attacks carried out by air, shelling and crossfire, as well as the use of imprecise weaponry resulting in the killing of students and educational personnel, damage to schools and school closures continued to be a serious concern. These incidents were prevalent particularly where front lines passed through urban areas and parties to conflict did not take sufficient precautions to protect critical civilian infrastructure. In 2016 in Yemen, three quarters of all attacks on schools and hospitals and in the Syrian Arab Republic, two thirds of all such attacks were carried out by air, including in densely populated

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Humanitarian aid for education: why it matters and why more is needed", *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 21, June 2015.

civilian areas and internal displacement camps. Armed forces and groups must be encouraged to undertake greater efforts to ensure that their rules of engagement reflect the principles of distinction and proportionality, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

12. Targeted attacks on education personnel as well as students and parents, including for ideological reasons, also remained a particular challenge. In Mali for instance, in July 2016, the director of a Government-run school was killed by armed elements allegedly opposed to secular education. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab compelled children to attend madrassas managed by the group and reportedly attempted to train them as soldiers. In several instances, elders, imams and madrassa teachers who failed to hand children over to the group were abducted. In Afghanistan, in February 2017, six girls' schools were temporarily closed following a verbal threat issued by the Taliban, which affected more than 3,500 students and teachers. Similar threats against female teachers or girls were also received in Iraq, Mali, Nigeria and the Syrian Arab Republic.

13. While indiscriminate and targeted attacks on schools fundamentally undermine the right to education, the military use of schools can have a similar negative effect on children's access to education. Notably, occupied schools become legitimate military targets, endangering students and educational personnel alike. The presence of combatants in schools, irrespective of their function, can also hamper the provision of classes; deter the attendance of educational personnel and students; lead to the looting of schools and further complicate access to schools owing to augmented security procedures. Prohibiting the military use of schools through the adoption of military orders and training, as well as ensuring accountability for perpetrators, is a vital element of preventing this practice. The Safe Schools Declaration has made an essential contribution towards this end by promoting concrete preventative measures. In Afghanistan for instance, where the Government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, the Ministry of Education promulgated two directives in 2016 instructing government security forces to refrain from using schools. At the time of writing, 68 countries had endorsed the Declaration, signalling a growing international consensus that preventing the military use of schools is essential to avoid disruption to education. In this regard, the Special Representative echoes the call by the Secretary-General in his report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (see S/2017/414) for more Member States to formally endorse the Declaration and its guidelines and encourages signatories to include those commitments in their national policies.

14. Particularly in protracted conflict situations, where there are scarce resources to invest in education, physical damage to schools may take years to rectify. Attacks on education and the military use of such facilities often also lead to a reduction of teaching staff and a drop in student enrolment and attendance rates and decrease the overall quality of education, preventing Governments from enabling children to enjoy their right to learning. In countries at war, attacks on education may therefore not only lead to a temporary interruption of children's access to schools, but also may close the doors to education for a lifetime.

15. As Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals sets out, universal education for children is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing inequality. In this regard, where schools have been destroyed or children are unable to attend classes owing to the security situation, alternative means of education, including community-based or remote solutions, should be supported. Whenever reparation programmes are elaborated following armed conflicts, provisions regarding the reconstruction of schools should be included. Moreover, where children have experienced substantive gaps in their education, accelerated learning programmes,

as have been put in place in Mosul, Iraq, following the liberation of the city, can facilitate children's re-entry into the formal education system.

16. Barriers to education, such as the scarcity of teachers, learning material and functioning schools are often further compounded in situations of displacement. As a result, refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than are children living in their country of origin, and only half of all refugee children attend primary school.[2] According to recent estimates published by UNICEF, almost 28 million children were forcibly displaced by conflict (17 million internally displaced children, 10 million refugees and 1 million asylum seekers).[3] With more than 10 million people newly displaced in 2016 alone, this number is unlikely to decrease in the near future. Solutions for these children must therefore urgently be found. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted on 19 September 2016, (General Assembly resolution 71/1), includes the commitment from Member States to provide basic education for all refugee and migrant children and highlights their resolve to provide this service within a few months of arrival. The Special Representative calls upon members of the General Assembly to ensure appropriate funding for programmes related to education when applying the comprehensive refugee response framework, which provides a road map for the implementation of the Declaration.

17. Protecting education from attack in armed conflict and ensuring opportunities for learning can also have a positive impact on broader efforts at conflict prevention. In the short term, children who attend school are less vulnerable to grave violations, including recruitment and use, rape and sexual violence and abductions. Preventing grave violations can avert new grievances and limit the further escalation of violence by breaking the cycle of retribution. In the long term, access to education can foster resilience as well as instil hope and a sense of normalcy in children, giving them the tools to become agents of positive transformation and support the more systemic processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Denial of humanitarian access as an increasing trend

18. In recent years, the denial of humanitarian access to children in armed conflict has become a more prevalent violation and, in 2016, 994 incidents were verified by the United Nations. Almost half of those incidents took place in South Sudan, which suffered a 100 per cent increase in incidents as compared with 2015. In the first quarter of 2017, humanitarian access continued to be regularly denied in numerous situations. For example, in the Syrian Arab Republic, parties to the conflict used besiegement as a method of warfare, depriving nearly 650,000 persons of access to food and other essential commodities, including life-saving and life-sustaining medical items. Deliberate bureaucratic impediments and restrictions by the Government, in addition to a fragile security situation and access limitations imposed by armed groups, further prevented the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In South Sudan in early 2017, humanitarian actors continued to be harassed and assaulted and came under attack as they conducted humanitarian activities. In one incident in Central Equatoria, six humanitarian actors were fired upon and killed as they attempted to reach populations in need. Humanitarian access in Rakhine State in Myanmar was also very limited during this period. In March, for instance, travel restrictions for civilians cost the life of a two-year-old child in Buthidaung south, as the child's parents were unable to obtain the "village departure

[2] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Missing out — refugee education in crisis", September 2016.

[3] United Nations Children's Fund, *Uprooted, The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children* (New York, September 2016).

certificate" in time to allow for his transfer to hospital. Moreover, at the time of writing, across the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, 182,000 children had no access to assistance owing to a significant reduction of the humanitarian space to operate, caused by the fragile security situation.

19. Such instances, which were also observed in other country situations, point to a trend of the politicization of the provision of humanitarian access for the delivery of aid, even when it is intended for children. As the Secretary-General noted in his report on the protection of civilians (S/2017/414), humanitarian action must remain distinct from political or military objectives. This principle is especially salient when assistance is intended to provide relief for children who are vulnerable to malnutrition and disease.

20. When humanitarians are denied access to one of the most vulnerable stratum of the population, children with disabilities, it is especially egregious, as these boys and girls and their families face almost insurmountable obstacles to reaching much needed assistance by others means. Unaccompanied children fleeing conflict-affected areas without family members or trusted adults who can take care of them face similar challenges in accessing humanitarian services. The challenge of undertaking journeys that are required to reach health-care facilities in conflict-affected areas with poor infrastructure, limited transportation and restrictions of movement are exponentially multiplied for these at-risk groups. Parties to conflict, as well as the relevant administrative authorities, need to be cognizant of the fact that denying essential aid to children can result in many more child deaths and is an egregious addition to the direct impact of hostilities. Even in instances when such services may not be considered an immediate life-saving activity, for example, when vaccination campaigns are necessary, children can sustain long-term injuries or die if access is denied.

21. In this regard, the Special Representative urges parties to conflict to commit to a renewed focus on depoliticizing the issue and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to children. These entities are reminded that it is a principle of customary international law that they must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of aid to the civilian population in need in areas subject to their control. Moreover, contained in regional human rights instruments[4] and numerous resolutions of the General Assembly and Security Council is a demand that parties to conflict provide access for relief personnel to refugee and displaced populations, often with special reference to the plight of children. Lastly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international human rights instrument, has several provisions that necessitate the facilitation of humanitarian relief to children in need, including ensuring that children seeking refugee status receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance.[5]

22. In a practical sense, the Special Representative urges parties to conflict to disseminate clear orders among their rank and file to specify that humanitarian assistance for children should be facilitated in all circumstances. Penalties should also be laid out for those who fail to adhere to this principle. In that regard, the Secretary-General announced that he would facilitate a global effort to mobilize Member States, civil society and other stakeholders to enhance respect for international law and strengthen the protection of civilians in conflict (see

[4] See, for example: the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999), art. 23; the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994), art. 9; and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (2004), principles 4 and 19. See also International Committee of the Red Cross, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Vol. 1: *Rules*, rule 131.

[5] See art. 22(1) Convention on the Rights of the Child; also see arts. 6, 24 and 27.

S/2017/414). This action plan will include awareness-raising, advocacy, the development and sharing of good practices, and research and dialogue on the root causes of parties' behaviour. The Special Representative wholeheartedly supports this initiative and will work with United Nation partners to ensure that the needs of children are included, and she calls upon the General Assembly to aid this effort. Furthermore, she urges Member States to adhere to the provisions of Assembly resolution 71/127 regarding preventing, responding to, investigating and prosecuting violations and abuses against children in humanitarian emergencies. Accountability for denying humanitarian assistance will be the core component of reducing this violation.

III. Dialogue, commitments and action plans with parties to conflict

A. Update on the "Children, not soldiers" campaign

23. The campaign "Children, not soldiers", launched in 2014 with UNICEF, formally ended in December 2016. The campaign was designed to generate momentum, political will, local ownership and international support to end and prevent the recruitment of children by national security forces in conflict situations. The campaign successfully raised international awareness on child recruitment and garnered vital support from Member States and civil society in view of putting an end to the practice. This work continues and has built on the progress achieved and lessons learned from the experiences of countries that have fully implemented their action plans.

24. At the time of the launch, eight countries were concerned by the campaign: Afghanistan; Chad; the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Myanmar; Somalia; South Sudan; the Sudan; and Yemen. Each of these countries has since demonstrated its commitment to a child-free army by signing action plans with the United Nations, thus strengthening an emerging global consensus that children should not be recruited and used in conflict.

25. Three years later, the consensus envisioned is now a reality, and thousands of children have been released and reintegrated with the assistance of UNICEF, peacekeeping and political missions, and other United Nations and partner NGOs on the ground. All Governments concerned by the campaign are engaged in an action plan process with the United Nations. Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have met the benchmarks set out in their action plans to end and prevent the recruitment of children in their armed forces. In Afghanistan, efforts to prevent underage recruitment have led to the adoption of age verification guidelines, which are used in child protection units that have been set up in 21 national police recruitment centres nationwide. Since their inception, child protection units have prevented almost 1,300 children (including 14 girls) from joining the police. The implementation of the action plan signed with the Sudanese national forces in 2016 is going apace with the development of a work plan on the implementation of the commitment and the formation of high-level and technical committees through presidential decrees. Command orders for the dissemination of the action plan were issued and focal points at the rank of Inspector-General were appointed to facilitate discussions on access. In Myanmar since 2012, close to 850 children and young people recruited as children have been released from the ranks of the Tatmadaw. In early 2017, the Government endorsed the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles), but, along with

Somalia, is still to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.[6]

26. Ongoing crises have hampered progress in the implementation of action plans in Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, but advocacy continued to secure the release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups.

27. The campaign has helped to generate new possibilities of engagement to respond to and prevent violations committed by non-State armed groups. More than 60 per cent of armed groups included in the annexes to the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (see A/70/836-S/2016/360) for the recruitment and use of children are active in countries where government forces are also listed, illustrating that the actions of armed groups are influenced by the conduct of government forces. In that regard, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, progress on the implementation of the action plan energized a broader national campaign to raise awareness against the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, which, among other things, is using the national football team and local artists as spokespersons. This initiative aims to engender a greater recognition among commanders of non-State armed groups of the legal and political repercussions associated with the recruitment of boys and girls.

28. The success of the "Children, not soldiers" campaign has opened additional avenues to strengthen child protection by increasing the awareness of parties to conflict of the impact of all six grave violations. In this regard, where appropriate, new action plans signed with parties to conflict go beyond ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children and include other grave violations. A new campaign, currently being elaborated by the Office of the Special Representative, will build on this momentum and focus on all the six grave violations.

29. In order to fully realize the goals of creating child-free armies, children formerly associated with armed forces must be appropriately reintegrated into society to prevent them from being rerecruited, thus breaking the cycle of violence. Following the release of children from armed forces or groups, a focus must be placed on the adequate programming and funding of reintegration programmes. Children who have been recruited and used carry the scars of conflict; thus effective reintegration is vital so that they can live full lives and contribute to a peaceful society. Girls face even greater difficulties in being accepted back into their families and communities, as they are often stigmatized or may be bringing a child home with them. Without adequate reintegration and assistance to help children find ways to become productive members of their communities, these boys and girls may grow up to contribute to the stalling or, worse, the reversal of peace and development efforts.

30. Community-based reintegration services that provide psychosocial assistance to children have been designed to help them reclaim their lives through educational and vocational opportunities, taking into account the particular needs of girls. In this regard, the Special Representative reiterates her call to Member States and regional and subregional organizations to ensure that the resources for separation and reintegration are sufficient and that there is a focus on sustainability, including by ensuring that children are reintegrated into safe and secure environments.

B. Addressing grave violations by non-State armed groups

31. In a particularly significant development outside of the purview of the campaign, the United Nations continued direct engagement with the Government of

[6] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 2173, No. 27531.

Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army. Efforts continued to ensure prioritization of the separation and reintegration of all children associated with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army and to put in place guarantees of non-repetition to prevent rerecruitment by other armed actors. The Special Representative urges the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army to fully and successfully implement the separation of children and demonstrate the importance of progress on this issue to other parties to conflict.

32. Throughout the reporting period, interactions also took place between the United Nations and armed groups from the Central African Republic, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Sudan and the Sudan. In the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces continued to implement their action plan and achieved significant progress. The group has now put in place all the elements necessary to prevent recruitment, and all 1,869 children identified by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front as associated with its armed wing underwent formal disengagement in a series of ceremonies, the last of which took place in March 2017. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front also promulgated a directive that requires regular self-monitoring and screening of armed elements as well as age assessment guidelines to establish internal safeguards for the prevention of association and reassociation of children.

33. Engagement by the United Nations with non-State armed groups also resulted in the signing of two new action plans in the reporting period. In the Sudan, the Secretary-General of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North signed an action plan in Geneva in November 2016 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, on the margins of a meeting held by Geneva Call, an NGO. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North committed to ensuring the release of children present in their ranks and to taking the measures necessary to halt child recruitment and use, including through the issuance and dissemination of military orders and the appointment of a high-level focal point to coordinate and collaborate with the United Nations to ensure the full implementation of this action plan. The group also pledged to facilitate the reintegration of the children in their communities. Lastly, in March 2017 in Mali, the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad signed an action plan with the United Nations to prevent the recruitment and use and sexual violence against children. This was a particularly positive development in the light of the fact that all entities under the umbrella of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad are bound by the provisions of the action plan, notwithstanding that only the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad is listed in annex I to the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict (A/70/836-S/2016/360).

IV. Raising global awareness and mainstreaming

A. Field visits and awareness-raising

34. Field visits and awareness-raising remained a central aspect of the activities of the Special Representative and her Office. In that regard, following the sustained exchanges with the Government of Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army and the guarantors, the Special Representative was invited to attend the official signing ceremony of the Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace, which was held in Cartagena on 26 September 2016. In her exchanges with representatives from the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army, the Special Representative congratulated both negotiating parties for reaching an agreement,

which included the best interest of the child and the primacy of children's rights as guiding principles.

35. In February 2017, the Special Representative gave an address in Brussels at the high-level opening of the Conference on Children and Armed Conflict, organized by Belgium under the theme "Sharing experiences on developing and implementing child protection policies in conflict settings". She also chaired a panel on the implementation of Security Council resolutions in the field. During the conference, the importance of identifying and sharing best practices between different organizations on developing and implementing child protection policies, including training and guidance, was emphasized.

36. Also in February 2017, the Special Representative participated in a ministerial international conference in Paris, co-hosted by the Government of France and UNICEF and in collaboration with the Paris Principles Steering Group, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups and the Paris Principles. The Special Representative delivered a speech during the plenary session and presented, among others, the outcomes of the "Children, not soldiers" campaign.

37. The Office of the Special Representative also took part in an annual workshop on children and armed conflict and women, peace and security, organized by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany in Berlin in April 2017. Concrete opportunities for Member States and regional organizations to deepen their engagement with regard to the protection of children affected by conflict were put forward at that occasion.

38. In June 2017 in London, the Special Representative was invited to be part of a high-level panel discussion on encouraging respect for law by non-State armed groups on the occasion of a conference organized by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the British Red Cross on the theme "Modern armed conflict and the evolution of international humanitarian law". During that visit, the Special Representative also met with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as a number of London-based NGOs.

B. Working with regional organizations

African Union

39. The strong partnership between the Special Representative and the African Union continued, and the Special Representative participated in the annual African Union high-level retreat for special envoys and mediators, held in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, in October 2016. The retreat focused on mediation practices and contemporary wars, and the Special Representative worked with participants to highlight the children and armed conflict concerns relevant to their work. The issue of violations attributed to contingents of the African Union Mission in Somalia was also discussed during the reporting period.

European Union

40. The Special Representative continued to strengthen her partnership with the European Union. In February and June 2017, she addressed the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union and in June 2017, she also addressed the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights and met in Brussels with the European Union Special Representative for Human Rights. During

these meetings, views and information were exchanged on the impact of armed conflict on children and on ways to further strengthen the cooperation between the European Union and the Office of the Special Representative with regard to the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

League of Arab States

41. Pursuant to the cooperation agreement between the League of Arab States and the Office of the Special Representative signed in 2014, the Special Representative continued to engage with the League of Arab States, including to advocate for ratification by all Members of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Building on this progress, the Office will seek to further deepen engagement with the regional organization during the next reporting period.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

42. The Special Representative engaged with NATO, with a view to deepening the partnership on the issue of children and armed conflict. In January 2017 in New York, the Special Representative met with the Commander of the Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces in Afghanistan, and in February 2017 in Brussels, she met with the Deputy Secretary-General of NATO to discuss ways to further strengthen the protection of children in NATO-led operations.

43. The Office of the Special Representative contributed to the development of NATO policies and guidelines on children and armed conflict, including the standard operating procedure on reporting and information-sharing in support of children and armed conflict, adopted in September 2016, which identifies the role of NATO in protecting children affected by armed conflict.

Organization of Islamic Cooperation

44. In November 2016, the Special Representative was invited to the thematic debate of the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on protecting and promoting the rights of children during situations of armed conflict, foreign occupation, emergencies and disasters. She delivered an address in which she encouraged further interaction between her Office and the Commission, and her Office provided inputs for the outcome document.

C. Building support with civil society

45. Strengthening relationships with academia as well as civil society and NGOs working on the issue of children and armed conflict is a key priority for the Special Representative. In that regard, in November 2016 in Geneva, she attended a meeting of non-State actors on the protection of children in armed conflict convened by Geneva Call, allowing her to discuss international child protection mechanisms and illustrate how the development and implementation of action plans can lead to strengthened child protection in conflict situations. The Special Representative also addressed Member States and civil society organizations through a video message at the second International Conference on Safe Schools, held in Buenos Aires in March 2017. Moreover, in recent months, the new incumbent has held joint briefings to share information on her priorities for the Office and to discuss ways of upholding the focus on the children and armed conflict agenda. The Special Representative met with over 50 organizations, in London, Brussels, Geneva and New York in June and July 2017.

D. Building support on partnerships with United Nations mechanisms and international organizations

46. The Special Representative continued to foster international cooperation to ensure respect for the rights of children affected by armed conflict. In that regard, in New York in February 2017, the General Assembly convened an informal meeting to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the children and armed conflict mandate. Panellists and Member States expressed their continued support to the mandate, highlighting that at a time where emerging and protracted conflicts are disrupting the lives of millions of boys and girls around the world, the mandate is more relevant than ever. At the occasion of the anniversary, the Special Representative published a booklet entitled "20 years to better protect children affected by conflict" on the work accomplished in the 20 years since the establishment of the mandate, which is available in English and French.

47. In addition to direct engagement with the General Assembly, there was intensive collaboration with other United Nations entities, in particular UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Moreover, in September 2016, the Special Representative participated in an event organized by the International Labour Organization and the Ford Foundation on the Global Alliance to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour (Alliance 8.7). On that occasion, she provided details on the contribution of her mandate to efforts to achieve target 8.7 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

48. In continuation of the Special Representative's long-standing collaboration with the International Criminal Court and following inputs provided by her Office to the Prosecutor's Policy Paper on Children, the Special Representative intervened by video message at the official launch of the paper in November 2016.

49. The following month, the Special Representative was invited by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the ninth annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges under the theme "Children on the move". In her speech, she focused, among other things, on ways to improve the international protection response for children affected by conflict.

50. The deprivation of liberty for children in situations of armed conflict remained an area of concern for the Special Representative, related in particular to responses to violent extremism. In that regard, the Office of the Special Representative worked closely with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and participated in December 2016 in an expert group meeting in Vienna on the treatment of children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups by the justice system. The Special Representative also continued to contribute to the in-depth global study on children deprived of liberty, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 69/157, paragraph 52 (d). In January and March 2017, respectively, the Special Representative was a panellist at briefings given in New York and Geneva to Member States on the global study.

51. Regular communication with the Human Rights Council to raise awareness and address violations of the rights of children in situations of conflict continued during the reporting period. In Geneva in March 2017, the Special Representative presented her annual report to the Council. The Office of the Special Representative also contributed to the work of the human rights mechanisms through submissions to the universal periodic review process of the Human Rights Council.

52. At the request of the Security Council, the Special Representative engaged with sanctions committees to brief them and provide information on grave

violations committed against children. In the reporting period, she briefed the sanctions committees concerning the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in November 2016 and the situation in South Sudan in March 2017. Also in New York, the Special Representative briefed the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict on specific country situations to keep Council members abreast of the latest developments pertaining to the mandate. During the 12-month period, country reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict were issued for Colombia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia and the Sudan. On 6 July 2017, the Special Representative briefed the Council on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Special Representative also led the preparation of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. The Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and members of the Committee remained key interlocutors to enhance information-sharing and encourage joint advocacy throughout the reporting period. In that regard, the Special Representative advocated for the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, with Member States that had not already ratified the treaty. To that end, she held bilateral meetings with Member States and actively briefed regional organizations, civil society and regional groups on the matter. During the reporting period, Pakistan ratified the Optional Protocol, bringing the total number of parties to 166.

V. Recommendations

53. **The Special Representative calls upon parties to conflict, Member States, regional and subregional organizations to make every effort to protect education in situations of armed conflict, including through adopting concrete measures to deter the military use of schools. In particular, the Special Representative encourages Member States that have not already done so to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.**

54. **The Special Representative calls upon Member States to provide appropriate funding for education programmes in conflict-related emergency situations, in particular when applying the comprehensive refugee response framework, and to ensure that appropriate provisions on children affected by armed conflict are included in the global compact on refugees.**

55. **The Special Representative expresses her concern in relation to the increased use of besiegement as a tactic of war and reminds all parties to conflict of their obligations under international law regarding the provision of assistance to the civilian population and implores them to depoliticize the delivery of humanitarian aid to children. Specifically, clear orders should be disseminated among the rank and file to specify that humanitarian assistance for children should be facilitated in all circumstances.**

56. **The Special Representative urges Member States and regional and subregional organizations to support her Office and other child protection actors to carry out lessons learned initiatives in order to compile comprehensive best practices on the children and armed conflict mandate. These best practices will be essential in discussions with parties to conflict, including on reducing the impact of the conduct of hostilities on children.**

57. **The Special Representative welcomes the leadership and contribution of regional and subregional organizations in the protection of children. She calls upon all these organizations to work closely with her Office to enhance legal protection frameworks as well as to facilitate the better integration of child**

protection considerations in their policies, operational planning and training of personnel.

58. **Recalling that the issue of the reintegration of children is crucial to ensure long-term peace, security and sustainable development, the Special Representative encourages the Member States concerned to take appropriate measures, including through supporting the relevant child protection actors, to reintegrate those children, giving special attention to the needs of girls. She also calls upon all Member States to provide the necessary political, technical and financial support to reintegration programmes.**

59. **The Special Representative notes the need to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to the Office and its partners to enable an increased focus on mandated tasks such as awareness-raising, lessons learned, best practices and proactive engagement with regional and subregional organizations.**

60. **In view of supporting the broader prevention efforts of the United Nations, the Special Representative emphasizes the importance of ensuring appropriate child protection capacity in situations on the children and armed conflict agenda and calls upon members of the General Assembly to support the strengthening of country-level capacity, whenever possible.**